

LOOKING AT HAIKU

by Elizabeth St Jacques

A common complaint of novice haiku poets is, "Most of my haiku are rejected. What am I doing wrong?" As newcomers soon discover, haiku may seem easy to write, but there is a lot more than meets the eye.

To understand haiku, the beginner must be aware of the basic rules. Because haiku deals with a moment that is presently happening, it is best written in the present tense. A haiku also contains a seasonal word (a *kigo*), that implies the season rather than stating it outright .

For example, instead of saying "Springtime," the reader will get a sense of Spring through the image of dandelions, a robin, melting snow or whatever. In other words, let the reader think, use his/her imagination -- participate in the experience.

Reader participation. Since haiku leaves so much to the imagination, readers draw upon their own experiences to relate to a haiku. What one reader sees in a haiku may be entirely different from the next. Therefore, when someone reads your haiku and finds a different vision, try not to explain the vision you intended. The greatest compliment a haiku poet can receive is for a reader to discover their own experience through it. Undoubtedly, this is what makes haiku unique and exciting.

While some excellent three-line 5-7-5 haiku are being written today, it's not uncommon to read one, two, four and even five line haiku, all of which have fewer than the traditional seventeen syllable count. Brevity is essential, so the tighter you write, the better.

When writing haiku, set aside the usual poetic devices. For many beginners, this seems to be

most troublesome as they incorrectly assume, because haiku relates to nature, the poem should be flowery, poetic, and contain a philosophical summation.

You are probably shaking your head by now and mumbling, "I've seen metaphor in published haiku!" You are quite right; metaphor has found its way into haiku -- even in ancient haiku by Japanese masters. But, in my opinion, metaphor that works best is subtle. Usually only haiku poets with a great deal of experience can pull it off. So those of you who are just beginning to write haiku would be wise to learn the basics and collect a long list of credible publishing credits before experimenting with metaphor in your work.

Beginners often better understand the mechanisms of haiku by *seeing* what another reader discovers. Therefore, let's look at a haiku by H.F. Noyes:

blue irises
one finger tall --
the morning sky

Immediately, one feels the relaxed mood of this poem, the solitude of a clear morning sky, its blue serving as a backdrop for the more pronounced blue of the irises. Blue suggests tranquillity, peace of mind. And because the flowers are only "one finger tall" the reader realizes he/she is looking at them from a distance -- perhaps stretched out on his/her stomach on the cool grass.

It is an unhurried time, nothing more pressing than to discover these beautiful flowers standing beneath a new morning sky. Is it before the work hour? Perhaps the observer is an early riser with the distinct purpose to enjoy and attune himself to nature before the bustle of daily chores. Or is it a day off when he can explore small wonders at leisure?

There is also a child-like quality to this poem, a purity of thought that enables the observer to notice "one finger tall" irises. Imagine! These majestic flowers that often

dominate a garden or tower above other flowers in a field have, by the observer's position, shrunk to "one finger tall." This viewpoint tells me that all things are at the mercy of the observer, being as tall or small as the eye (or mind) registers. Therefore, I am reminded that all is not as it appears; there are other dimensions to everything -- IF I take the time and interest to seek them out.

On the other hand, from the point of view of the irises: they are content as they *are*, as is the morning sky. Now I ask myself: am I content with and within myself? If not, is it because of my own expectations or because of what others expect of me?

Let's look now at the structure of this haiku. As you will note, this haiku has only twelve syllables. To tighten (or lengthen) it would destroy the sharp pure image that the author presents. Insofar as arrangement, the first line balances perfectly with line three. Although "blue" is not mentioned in the final lines, one automatically thinks of a blue sky, probably paler in intensity than that of the flowers. Therefore, the deep blue versus pale blue serves not only as a color contrast but as a spiritual one as well. Between these lines, the "one finger tall" is the human element. Is it really coincidental that the poet chose to place this line between two images of nature where humans/beasts/birds naturally dwell in the order of existence?

As shown, there is much more depth to haiku than the eye initially realizes. A great deal of thought goes not only into line arrangement and word choice, but in the presentation of a *lean* image (the pure image) that permits the reader to fill in the spaces via personal experience and imagination.

Of course, there is much more to learn about haiku but if you apply these basic rules, your haiku are sure to improve. Also, by reading and studying haiku by respected haiku poets, your own work will benefit.

Finally, if you want to write haiku that will be appreciated and remembered, live haiku every waking hour. When out for a walk getting groceries, taking a shower -- everyday, common occurrences -- fine-tune yourself to capture a haiku moment and free it through your unique vision.

Haiku may be small, simple, and insignificant in all physical appearances, but remember, we once thought that about the humble bee